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'Bottled Beauty' Since 1600 B.C.

by Diane Sharbo, H. JI. 1

From "Women and Cosmetics" by Patricia Wieboski

When beauty from within is lacking, women use different substances to improve Nature. These substances, called cosmetics, are as varied as the rainbow, and they are received by men in varied ways.

Cosmetics are not new. The ancient Egyptian scrolls of 1600 B.C., describe remedies for gray hair, wrinkles, and baldness. Thus we find that the quest for beauty is not confined to women.

As history progressed, the Greeks and Romans reached a high state of perfection in their use of perfumes and ointments. Men lavishly applied all sorts of dyes, paints, and oils.

However, the men of fifth century Athens disliked the use of cosmetics. Isochomachus lectured to his young wife with these strong points:

Don't imagine, my dear wife, that I like paint and powder better than I do your own natural color; but as the gods have made horses to be most pleased with horses. . . and sheep with sheep, so human beings also find the human body most lovely when it is not bedaubed. Tricks like these might possibly succeed in fooling strangers, but . . .

The Roman men and women continued the use of unguents and perfumes. After exertion or exposure the body was rubbed with perfumed olive oil imported from Syria, Egypt, Arabia, and farther East. Great delight was taken in securing costly, sweet-smelling ointments.

The Greeks not only were concerned with their skin, but their hair was a point of interest. Nature had been generous to the Greeks in many ways. Among other things, she bestowed upon them a luxuriant growth of rich, glossy hair. Both the men and women took infinite pains to make it lovely. Athenian and Spartan men let their hair grow long, often arranging it in curls with bangs in front. For special occasions hair was arranged even more elaborately.

As we skip to more modern days, we find these comments from American husbands at the close of the Revolutionary War:



Ladies . . . often had their hair tortured for four hours at a sitting in getting the proper crisped curls of a hair curler. Some who designed to be inimitably captivating, not knowing they could be sure of professional services, where so many hours were occupied upon one gay head, have actually had the operation performed the day before it was required, then have slept all night in a sitting position to prevent the derangement of their frizzles and curls.

The men also complained about powder (pulverized starch) immoderately covering the face, neck, and arms. But their main complaint was the surprising use of false hair in quantity. Many a man felt the women's fine hair—in order—would be much less trouble than a bunch of waving curls everywhere!

In the mid-eighteenth century, England considered cosmetics such a menace that Parliament introduced a bill to protect men from women's use of them. Its text provided:

That all women, of whatever rank, profession, or degree, whether virgins, maids, or widows, that shall from and after such act, impose upon, seduce and betray into matrimony, any of his majesty's subjects by the scents, paints, cosmetic washes, artificial teeth, false hair, spanish wool (a wool impregnated with carmine to color the skin), iron stays, hoops, high-heeled shoes, and bolstered hips, shall incur the penalty of the law now in force against the witchcraft and like misdemeanours, and that the marriage upon conviction shall be null and void.

Excessive use of cosmetics continues in spite of the men who would like to reform women's views. Cosmetics have their place, however, and every woman must decide which are essential in enhancing her appearance.